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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: NIGERIAN AMBASSADOR TO U.S. FEARS
NIGERIA'S BREAKUP UNLESS CONSTITUTION IS CHANGED

Classified by Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons: 1.5,
b, d.

1. (S) Summary George Obiozor, Nigeria's ambassador to the U.S., fears that Nigeria will break up "like Yugoslavia" unless the presidency's rotation amongst the geopolitical regions is "institutionalized" by a new or revised constitution. He advocates President Obasanjo remaining in office past 2007 to preside over a constitutional convention. End summary.

2. (S) George Obiozor came to lunch, at his request, on November 2. His message was that there is serious danger that Nigeria will disintegrate in the near future if the rotation amongst the regions of the presidency is not institutionalized by a new constitution. He said that the North's assumption that the next president of Nigeria will be a Northern Muslim is misplaced; the South, the South/South and the East, especially the old Biafra, will violently object. He described Nigeria as riddled with religious, ethnic and social conflicts, with too many of the fault lines being between the ever-poorer North and rest of Nigeria. The fundamental poverty of the North, he said, had long been obscured by the fact that the region controlled the Federal government -- and benefited formally, informally and disproportionately from energy revenue. The South, centered on the old Biafra, had been frozen out of national power since the end of the civil war. But, he continued, the South would no longer accept the inevitability that the next president of Nigeria will be a Northern Muslim. Unless there is a fundamental change in Nigeria's governance, he continued, there was a possibility, even probability that the country would degenerate into "chaotic civil war" -- that the country would breakup like Yugoslavia, not peacefully like Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union. And the resulting chaos would provide opportunities for external terrorist organizations to establish themselves more deeply in the North.

3. (S) Obiozor dismissed the current leading candidates: Buhari is a Muslim fanatic; Marwa has no national constituency; Atiku is corrupt. Only Babangida, with his wealth and national network has a chance -- but he may not have the ambition. Obiozor said that the next president is likely to come from amongst the governors -- or "an elder statesman." But, Obiozor continued, much of Nigeria will no longer accept a Northern Muslim candidate. He said the South/South, the South and the East are likely to follow the "Croatian model" during the early days of Yugoslavia's disintegration and boycott -- or worse -- an election in which the leading presidential candidates are Northern Muslims.

4. (S) The way out, Obiozor continued, is for President Obasanjo to remain in office past 2007 to preside over a constitutional convention that would establish a single-term presidency of five or six years and institutionalize its rotation amongst the geopolitical regions -- with the South coming first and the North last. I asked about the likely reaction of the Dangote and Dantata clans that have controlled so much of Northern political life. Obiozor said that they would be willing to forego controlling the presidency to ensure political stability in Nigeria. When I asked about southern candidates, Obiozor said that they are legion -- once the assumption that the next president must be a Northern Muslim is set aside. When I pressed him further, he said that Rivers State Governor Peter Odili is particularly attractive. He did not respond to my question about what President Obasanjo's views might be on remaining in office temporarily to preside over a constitutional convention.

5. (S) Comment: Obiozor came to lunch immediately after his meeting with the President, and he said he had spent several hours with the President the night before. However, Obiozor did not claim to be speaking on behalf of the President. His assessment of the possibility or probability of a bloody breakup of Nigeria is unusual here

in government circles, more common in civil society. On the other hand, the emphasis he puts on the increasing disaffection of the southern regions of the country is salutary; with our focus on the bunkering and militia activity in the delta and the broad disaffection in the North it is easy to lose sight of the deep sense of grievance to be found elsewhere in Nigeria. All of the current leading presidential candidates -- Babangida, Buhari, Marwa, Atiku are Northern Muslims who are part of the traditional establishment; Obiozor is warning that the game may no longer be played by the old rules.

16. (S) Comment Continued: Obiozor's bottom line is that only President Obasanjo can save the country from chaos and disintegration -- by presiding over a constitutional convention that would have the effect of increasing (or restoring) the power of the area of the old Biafra and adjacent areas by institutionalizing the rotation of the presidency amongst all of the regions. Note: implicit in Obiozor's idea of constitutional convention presided over by President Obasanjo is the postponement of the 2007 elections. In the context of a constitutional convention, this might even be legal. Obiozor is an Ibo from Enugu state, a Christian, who has been a fixture of every regime since Shagari's. An academic (he refers to himself as professor), Obiozor is a former ambassador to Israel. He has not been commonly regarded as part of president Obasanjo's inner circle. A consummate survivor in Nigeria's tumultuous politics, he knows from whence his bread is buttered. Obiozor has been playing an increasingly active part in PDP politics by working with fellow pro-Obasanjo Ibos to weaken anti-Obasanjo PDP governors in the Southeast. If Obasanjo hangs on after 2007, Obiozor figures to likewise benefit. While we have no doubt that Obiozor believes what he told us, his outlook is also shaped by his political bias and self-interests. End comment.

CAMPBELL